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NOT-SO-FULL-RIDE SCHOLARSHIP:
ANALYSIS OF MERIT-BASED AID GPA RENEWAL REQUIREMENTS

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis
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Abstract

This paper examines the potential consequences of the 3.50 GPA renewal requirement for the Regents Scholar Tuition Commitment (RSTC) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). To examine these potential outcomes, I've synthesized several studies of Georgia's Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) program. Additionally, I sought to compare the RSTC with other similar programs at UNL's peer Big Ten institutions. To accomplish this, I compiled and analyzed public information on merit-based programs at the 14 Big Ten schools from their university websites. In doing so, I found that the RSTC is in the lowest quartile in terms of value to the student, is tied with 2 other programs for having the highest GPA renewal requirement and is awarded to a relatively large number of students: 964 in 2020.

Key Words:

Merit-Based Scholarship, Grade Point Average (GPA), Scholarship Renewal, Economics, Regents Scholar Tuition Commitment

Introduction

Postsecondary education is extremely important in setting up young adults for a life of prosperity. Bachelor's degrees have been estimated to increase lifetime earnings by about 43 percent (\$840,000 in 50 years) for men and 51 percent (\$587,000 in 50 years) for women (Tamborini et al 2015). This suggests undergraduate degrees are a significant investment in human capital with high returns. Costs of attending postsecondary schools, however, are increasing faster than inflation.

According to the National Center for Education and Statistics, price of attending public universities has increased 31 percent in the 10-years between the 2007-2008 and 2017-2018 academic years. Inflation from 2007-2018 was only 21 percent (Webster 2021). Average wages in the US over the same time-period increased 24 percent, showing cost of attendance has increased not only nominally but in real terms as well.

In the 2019-2020 academic year, the largest source of funding for college students came from their parents' incomes and savings (44 percent of total cost) (Sallie Mae 2020). The second largest funding source, at 25 percent of the total was scholarships and grants. Those scholarships and grants can be split into two types: need-based aid and merit-based aid.

Need-based aid is generally awarded to students who come from low-income families. The goal of need-based aid is to help students whose main barrier to a college education is a financial barrier. Merit-based aid, on the other hand, is generally given to reward students who have high achievements (academic or otherwise). Merit-based aid is often given with no regard to financial need, and often is intended to incent the student offered it to do something. In the case of merit-

based scholarships given out by universities, the institution offering the scholarship wants to encourage high-achieving students to come to their school.

This paper focuses on the potential outcomes and consequences of merit-based scholarships, with a special focus on the Regents Scholar Tuition Commitment (RSTC) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The RSTC provides merit aid to in-state students, but is only guaranteed for 1 year, and requires student to maintain a high GPA each year, with no grace period offered if students fail to meet requirements. My goal is to make the case that the GPA renewal requirements must be examined in more detail.

This paper begins with a literature review, summarizing work done on Georgia's HOPE scholarship program, and other similar merit-based programs in other states. Following this, the paper explains what the RSTC is, who gets it, and its requirements. Then, the paper more completely explains the GPA requirement, then analyzes its potential impacts. Next, this paper compares the RSTC to other scholarships offered at Big Ten Universities. At the end of this paper, I explain my future work with a proposal and model to study how Regents Scholars behave at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Literature Review

Merit-based scholarships have a long history with private education institutions in America; since 1955, the National Merit Scholarship program has provided grants to 8,000 first-year college students who are among the top scorers on standardized tests. In the public education sector, however, merit aid has not been historically prevalent. The federal government has historically given financial aid (in the form of grants and reduced interest loans) to students on a need-based basis, as determined primarily by parents' income, assets, and size of family. At the

state level, government aid programs have increased dramatically. Prior to 1991, there were no state-level merit-based aid programs.

As of 2016, there are at least 15 states that have broad merit-based scholarship programs (Upton 2016). These merit scholarship programs are intended to be mutually beneficial. Merit-based scholarships allow strong students who otherwise couldn't afford to attend postsecondary school do so, they provide significant value to students who would have gone to college without the award, and they encourage students in both groups to stay in-state (not export their talents and abilities to other schools).

Georgia's HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) created in 1992 is one of the first large scale, merit-based, state-funded scholarship program. Since its creation, HOPE has provided over \$10 billion in financial aid to students seeking postsecondary education in Georgia. HOPE is funded by the state lottery system and has assisted more than 1.8 million students attend eligible Georgia postsecondary schools (Georgia Student Finance Commission 2021).

The purpose of this program is to reward Georgia's high-achieving students, as well as provide incentive for them to stay in the state. The program has relatively low requirements: students must have maintained a 3.00 GPA (B average) in high school, as well as receive at least a 19 on the ACT to qualify. At this threshold, 97 percent of incoming first year students at the University of Georgia qualify for the scholarship (DiLonardo 2014).

Education policy researchers have done extensive research on HOPE. Dynarski (2005) examined HOPE (and to a lesser extent, similar programs in other states) to explore some of the outcomes of the program. Dynarski (2005) estimates HOPE increased college attendance by 8.6 percent in

Georgia relative to other Southern states without a similar program. In addition, HOPE appears to increase the probability of four-year college attendance by 4.5-8.5 percent. Probability of attendance at two-year private colleges increased by about 1.5 percent, and a drop in probability of attending two-year public college by 1.7-5.5 percent. Dynarski (2005) concludes that HOPE increased the likelihood that Georgia students would remain in Georgia. Dynarski (2000) examined similar programs in seven other states, finding they closed racial and ethnic disparity in college attendance; contrasting her past findings that HOPE increased such disparity.

Additionally, Dynarski (2005) found large and significant impacts of HOPE (and its equivalent program in Arkansas) on college outcomes. She found that the programs increase the share of young people receiving a degree by 3 percent across the board. This effect is most influential among women: it increased degree receipt by 3.8 percent for white non-Hispanic women, 6 percent for Hispanic women, and 7 percent for nonwhite women. Dynarski (2005) also found evidence supporting the conclusion that among students who would have gone to college anyway had they not received a scholarship, persistence to graduation appeared to increase by 5 to 11 percent.

Research on HOPE and other similar programs indicate they have greatly benefitted students, by increasing attendance, keeping good students in-state, and for the most part closing racial and ethnic gaps in attendance. Additionally, these programs increase probability of degree completion and persistence.

Conversely, Dee and Jackson (1999) explore some of the intended and unintended consequences of the program. They explore what happens to HOPE students after they've enrolled in college. HOPE is only guaranteed for 1 year, as each subsequent renewal requires students to maintain a

3.00 GPA. This clearly creates incentives for students to do well in their classes and get above a 3.00. This requirement necessarily creates attrition though, as those who fail to meet the requirements lose out on a significant financial incentive.

Dee and Jackson (1999) studied that attrition at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Strikingly, they found that roughly half of all HOPE scholars (at Georgia Tech) lose their award after the first year. There are statistically significant differences in scholarship attrition across academic disciplines; science, engineering, and computing majors are 21-51 percent more likely to lose their scholarship than students in other disciplines. They additionally found that black and Hispanic students were significantly more likely to lose their scholarship than white students; however, this correlation disappeared when student ability was factored in. Their findings indicate a strong relationship between scholarship attrition and student ability.

In a similar study in the University System of Georgia, Sjoquist and Winters (2015) found that HOPE reduced the likelihood of earning a STEM degree. They found HOPE decreases total number of STEM graduates by 12.6 percent. They found that regarding initial choice of major, HOPE does not change freshman students' behavior. The decrease in STEM degrees conferred was found to largely be due to students switching majors to a non-STEM field or by not completing their degree.

One of the proposed mechanisms for this effect was through the 3.00 GPA requirement, however Sjoquist and Winters (2015) found little significant evidence that first-year GPA affected probability of earning a STEM degree. Sjoquist and Winters (2015) also proposed 4 other mechanisms, none of which they could confirm as mechanisms of the decrease in probability of earning a STEM degree.

HOPE and other similar programs have some arguably negative impacts. Students studying science, engineering, or computing are more likely to lose HOPE. Additionally, HOPE lowers the likelihood of earning a STEM degree, partially through students who change majors away from STEM. This effect occurred across all ability levels but was most profound in students who have good but unexceptional math skills as determined by SAT math score.

Value Added

While there is extensive, robust research on the Georgia HOPE program, it is unclear if these findings can be generalized to all merit-based scholarship programs. The fifteen states that have programs like Georgia's HOPE are for the most part located in the American South. In other states, though, there are alternative forms of merit-based scholarships offered. Many public universities across the country offer aid incentives in the form of low or no cost tuition, either through remittance or through private donors. It is important to identify if the studied effects also occur in these programs.

This paper focuses on the consequences of scholarship renewal requirements. Scholarship GPA renewal requirements may lead to students not finishing their degree. If scholarships don't offer grace periods for students to recover their GPA and earn back their scholarship, students may become disheartened and drop out of school entirely. Additionally, students who fear losing or do lose their scholarship may change their behavior, for example by changing majors. It's not hard to imagine that disadvantaged or more vulnerable students may be disproportionately affected by the renewal requirements.

With a high GPA requirement, it's possible for bright, hardworking students to struggle or make mistakes which cost them their scholarship. Losing their scholarship means a student faces the

challenge of finding new ways to pay tuition. They can apply for federal aid, go into debt, draw from family resources, none of which are ideal. If they fail to seek sources of income or can't justify going into debt, these bright students may choose to drop out. If the renewal GPA requirement were sufficiently lowered, less people would lose their scholarship and face these difficulties.

If the GPA requirement is lowered too far, however, students may not be motivated to achieve their potential. There is potentially an optimum level that minimizes bright, hardworking students losing their scholarship while still encouraging academic achievement. To find this ideal level for a GPA cutoff, more work must be done to examine the consequences of strict GPA requirements for scholarships.

Regents Scholarship

The Regents Scholars Tuition Commitment (RSTC) is a program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) offered to Nebraska-resident high school graduating seniors based on their academic achievement. This commitment is an agreement to fully waive University of Nebraska tuition for up to four years. While there is a RSTC at each of the University of Nebraska's 3 main campuses, for simplicity's sake this paper will focus only on the RSTC offered at UNL.

The RSTC was formerly known as the Regents Scholarship. In December 2020, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents (the administrative board that runs the University of Nebraska) clarified that the Regents Scholarship is not a scholarship but rather a tuition discount. Despite this nominal difference, the RSTC for all intents and purposes is a merit-based scholarship. The Board of Regents made this clarification because there are no donors or funds supporting the

program; Regent Scholars' tuition is not paid by anyone but is waived by the university. The source of funding however has no impact on the value the program provides to its students.

For the 2020 fall semester, UNL offered the Regents Scholarship to 964 students. This is 4.75 percent of the total undergraduates enrolled in the 2020 fall semester. This amount, in terms of the number of students and the percent of undergraduate class, has been increasing the past 5 years. For the 2016 fall semester, 645 scholarships were offered to students, which was just 3.10 percent of the 20,833 students enrolled that semester. In 1999, 319 Regents Scholarships were offered; then just 1.80 percent of the 17,727 students enrolled in the fall semester. It is important to note that there are surely some students who are awarded the Regents Scholarship but do not enroll at UNL, and who instead decide to attend another institution or decide against college overall. Thus, the number of Regents Scholarships offered is expected to be different than the total number of new Regents Scholars each year. For a more detailed chart of Regents Scholarships offered by year, see Table 1.

This opportunity is only available to in-state students and is awarded on merit. While students are evaluated holistically and can demonstrate their academic achievement through their high-school GPA, class rank, or personal statement, eligibility for RSTC is determined primarily by ACT score (or equivalent SAT score).

The ACT (originally an abbreviation of American College Testing) is a standardized nationwide exam that tests students on their college readiness. It is a multiple-choice exam testing four basic categories: English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science. Students are scored in each section on a scale from 0-36, with 0 being the weakest possible score and 36 being the strongest. The scores from the four sections are then averaged and rounded to a whole number to derive the composite

score. There is an optional writing portion, which UNL doesn't require and does not count toward the composite score.

UNL considers a composite score of 32 on the ACT a competitive score for scholarship candidacy. Among the 2018 graduating high school class, 28,240 students nationally received a composite score of 32. That year, the ACT was taken 1,670,497 times. That puts students who received a 32 in the 96th percentile of national test-takers (ACT Inc. 2020a). This shows that Regents Scholars are some of the highest-achieving high school students.

In spring of 2016, the Nebraska state legislature passed LB 930, which made the ACT compulsory for high school juniors. LB 930 also provided funding for this program, so every Nebraska high schooler gets the opportunity to take the test once for free. Students who have “significant cognitive disabilities” are eligible to take an alternate test. The legislature uses data from these tests as part of their accountability process for state high schools. This program allows and mandates students take this test who otherwise would not have chosen to or would not have been able to due to costs. Because of this, every student has the opportunity to be eligible for the RSTC.

Other than this free test offered to Nebraska high school juniors, there are money and time costs associated with the ACT. For the 2020-2021 academic year, the registration fee is \$55.00 (ACT Inc. 2020b). Additionally, the test is timed and takes 3 hours and 30 minutes including breaks. These costs are not extreme to some but may represent hefty barriers to low-income and otherwise disadvantaged students.

Despite the cost, it is beneficial to take the ACT multiple times. Andrews and Ziomek (2008) find that retaking the test exhibits positive, diminishing returns in the form of increased score.

Students who score from 15-28 make up the vast majority of ACT takers, and approximately 50 percent of those see a 1 or more point increase in their composite score. Upon retesting, students maintain or increase their score approximately 75 percent of the time.

Furthermore, Moore et. al (2018) find that preparing for the test improves a student's score when they take the test again. When they examined the mechanisms of test preparation, they found a statistical significance only in the form of private tutoring or consultation. Not everyone has access to or the ability to pay for tutors or consultants.

Not surprising, students who take the ACT more times and who are privately tutored in between attempts are more likely to have higher scores. This creates a barrier for high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds, as testing fees, tutoring fees, and time are greater barriers for them. Additionally, students whose parents never attended college may not fully understand the benefit of a high ACT score, and thus be less willing to pay the cost or to take it multiple times. Students in high-income families have a clear advantage due to their ability to pay for private tutoring and ability to pay for ACT retakes. These differences due to family income could be especially harmful among the group of students on the margin of receiving the tuition commitment (those who score a 30 or 31 on the ACT,) where getting a small boost in ACT score could correspond with receiving the RSTC and thus significant value.

The tuition commitment represents substantial value to the Regents Scholars. The RSTC waives up to 135 credit hours over a 4-year period. For the 2020-2021 academic year, baseline in-state tuition is estimated at \$259 per credit hour. If all 135 credit hours offered are taken advantage of, the scholarship is worth \$34,965. Certain colleges within UNL, however, charge more per credit hour than the baseline. Classes in the College of Business cost \$321.00/credit hour, classes in the

College of Architecture cost \$349.00, and classes in the College of Engineering cost \$371.00.

While students in those colleges with higher differential tuition won't take all their credit hours within those colleges, the RSTC is still more valuable to Business, Architecture, and Engineering students.

The full value of the scholarship, however, will only be utilized if the students keep the RSTC for all four years. When offered to high-school seniors, the RSTC is only guaranteed for one academic year. At the end of the student's first academic year and each subsequent year following, the University will renew their tuition commitment only if the Regents Scholar meets the following list of requirements:

- Students must be enrolled full-time each semester (take 12 credits/semester minimum)
- Students must take an average of 15 credit hours per semester per year. Of those, 18 credits must be on a graded scale (not pass/no pass or pass/fail)
- Students must enroll in consecutive semesters to maintain the scholarship; they are not able to take a gap semester or year unless an exception is granted.
- Students must either have a cumulative 3.50 GPA or be in the top 25 percent of their class within their college to renew the scholarship.

GPA Requirement

As stated above, students must either have a cumulative 3.50 GPA or be in the top 25 percent of their class to renew the scholarship.

Grade Point Average (GPA) is an average of all the grades a student has received. It is calculated by taking the mean of a student's letter grades after being converted to their appropriate

weighted value. At UNL and most other institutions, GPA is on a 4.00-point scale. Table 2 indicates what weight each letter grade corresponds with.

A student who receives a grade of an A or A+ in every class will have a 4.000 GPA. A student who receives a grade of a B in every class will have a 3.000 GPA. A student who gets half B's and half A's or A+'s will have a 3.50. A 3.50 could also come from receiving half A-'s and half B+'s, three times as many A's as C's, and various other combinations.

Credits transferred from other universities in the University of Nebraska system (UNO, UNK, UNMC) are graded credits, and count towards a student's GPA.

Note that the University of Nebraska at Omaha has a dual enrollment program that allows high school students to count some of their advanced high school classes as credits taken at UNO. The intention of the program is to give students a head start on their college degree, saving them money and time. Grades earned in these dual enrolled classes count as graded credits at UNO, meaning high school students who choose to dual enroll have a GPA before stepping foot on a college campus. Future Regents Scholars must be careful when they dual enroll; if they perform poorly in dual enrolled courses, they must be extra diligent as first-year UNL students to keep their GPA above the 3.50 cutoff.

For renewal purposes of the RSTC, GPA is taken to the third decimal and is not rounded. The Office of Scholarships and Financial aid reviews all tuition commitments once spring grades have been submitted. After checking the GPA requirement, the office checks the class rank. The top 25 percent of the class nearly always has a GPA of 3.50 or higher, making GPA the stricter requirement.

GPA Requirement Analysis

Because the GPA requirement is the most common reason Regent Scholar's lose their tuition commitment, it is especially important to examine the potential consequences of this requirement.

Students who easily achieve 4.0 or similarly high GPA's may never fear they'll lose their RSTC. However, as students whose GPA falls closer to the 3.50 cutoff may worry about keeping their scholarship. Due to the significant value of the RSTC, we expect Regents Scholars to make academic choices to increase their GPA and ensure the RSTC is renewed for all three remaining years.

Some academic choices to increase GPA are certainly positive: students may decide to study harder, seek help from professors or tutors, or put in more effort in and outside of class.

However, there are certainly some undesirable academic choices students can make to increase their GPA. For instance, students who fear they may lose their scholarship may decide to pad their schedule with easier classes. If these students are in a particularly demanding major, they may change disciplines entirely in search of a less rigorous major.

As shown above, Regents Scholars are in the 96th percentile of high-achieving students nationally by ACT score. These students have great potential to achieve in college. In fact, Radunzel and Nobel (2012) found ACT composite score is an effective measure at predicting success at 4-year institutions (like the University of Nebraska-Lincoln). Those with high ACT composite scores are most likely to succeed. If it is desirable that the students who show the most promise are the ones pursuing the most difficult majors, we should ensure the GPA requirement doesn't interfere with this pairing.

Examining data from a small liberal arts college, Rask (2010) found a wide distribution in average GPAs. The Education program had the highest average GPA, while the Chemistry program had the lowest. It is not surprising that STEM programs are more difficult courses of study. At UNL, also, different programs have different difficulties. As evidence, the requirements to make the Dean's list (an honorary list of students who performed well in an academic semester) vary by college. The requirements are all based on GPA, but each college has cutoffs of varying strictness. The College of Engineering's cutoff for the Dean's list is the lowest, at 3.50. On the strictest end, the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, the College of Architecture, and the College of Education and Human Sciences all have the highest cutoff of 3.75. The GPA requirement for the RSTC, however, is 3.50 for everyone and does not vary by college.

As stated earlier, Dee and Jackson (1999) found Georgia Tech HOPE students who majored in science, engineering, or computing are 21-51 percent more likely to lose their scholarship than students in other disciplines. While the RSTC and HOPE are not identical, we can't rule out that there are not similar consequences of the GPA requirement between them. Regents Scholars in more difficult majors (like science, engineering, and computing) may be more likely to lose their scholarship, and thus have more incentive to switch to an easier major or take easier classes.

This effect (if it occurs) is perverse; the students who are most likely to succeed and have the highest potential have incentives to switch to easy majors or take easy classes. Additionally, students who change to an easier major may be lowering their future economic outcomes.

Webber (2014) found that students who graduate with a STEM degree (science, technology, engineering, or math) have the highest lifetime earnings, while Arts/Humanities majors have the lowest among college graduates.

Another undesirable way students may improve their GPA is through cheating. Cheating can be a big problem at universities. In 2017, Kessler international surveyed 300 students from public and private colleges; 86 percent of respondents claimed they've cheated in school (McCabe, as cited in Farkas 2017). Through cheating, students may score better on assignments, tests, and quizzes. However, there are additional consequences of cheating. For one, cheaters don't learn the material as well and may struggle even more down the line; And, if caught, cheaters may face harsh consequences.

When caught, students who have committed an act of academic dishonesty (as outlined in the UNL Student Code of Conduct) face a variety of consequences, as recommended by the instructor of the course where the violation occurred. On the less severe end, students may have to take a short course on the importance of academic integrity. This course costs the student \$100. On the more severe end, students can receive an F on the assignment or exam they cheated on; or they may receive a failing grade for the whole course. Receiving an F in a course has a severe negative impact on GPA and could easily drop a Regents Scholar below the 3.50 GPA cutoff. In extreme or repeated cases of Student Code of Conduct violation, students can even be permanently expelled from UNL.

Despite Regents Scholars best efforts and interests, some inevitably will lose their scholarship. In a 2009 interview with then-Director of the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid Craig Munier, The Daily Nebraskan found that 22 percent of Regents Scholars lose their scholarship sometime before graduation (Hirst 2009). According to Munier, most students who lose the scholarship lose it freshman year, and those who retain it for at least one year are very likely to keep it for their remaining three.

According to Munier, the University depends on some students losing their scholarship, and wouldn't be able to provide as many scholarships if they had a more lenient renewal policy. Additionally, Munier said students must continue to excel if they want to keep their scholarships; and said some students may abuse the privilege of their scholarship if they don't have the incentive to strive that the GPA requirement establishes.

Munier considered the 3.50 GPA requirement to be "quite liberal," as roughly 25 percent of UNL students have at least a 3.50 GPA, and Regents Scholars are usually in the top 2 or 3 percent of the incoming freshman class. Compared to similar programs at UNL's Big Ten peer institutions however, the 3.50 GPA requirement is quite conservative.

Regents Scholar Tuition Commitment Big Ten Comparison

Among the 14 Big Ten institutions (including UNL), 13 offer a merit-based scholarship that covers most or all of tuition. Several of those scholarships include awards for fees, room and board, and other expenses (See Table 3a).

Ten of those thirteen schools that offer scholarships publicly display their GPA requirements for renewing their scholarship. Among those 10, the mean GPA requirement is 3.065 with a standard deviation of 0.43. This places the RSTC's requirement of 3.50 just over 1 standard deviation above the mean. The 3.50 GPA requirement is also the strictest requirement in the Big Ten. The program at Rutgers University and part of the program at The Ohio State University also share this 3.50 GPA requirement, making it the second most common requirement. Five schools (the University of Iowa, Indiana University, Purdue University, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Wisconsin) have a renewal GPA requirement of 3.00, which is both the median and mode GPA requirement. The lowest GPA requirement is 2.00, for the

Provost's Award at Penn State University. This GPA is a low outlier. Full descriptive data on the GPA requirements of these 10 schools can be found in Table 3b.

The value of these scholarships, however, have a large range. The most valuable scholarship is the Stamps Scholarship offered at the University of Michigan, at \$139,938. Unfortunately, the GPA renewal requirement for this scholarship is not public. The scholarship with the lowest value at \$24,000 is the Provost's Award at Penn State University (which also has the lowest GPA requirement, 2.00). The mean value is \$68,590, and the median value is \$53,048 (halfway between the Maroon and Gold Leadership award at the University of Minnesota, valued at \$48,000, and the Distinguished Freshman Scholarship at Michigan State University, valued at \$58,096). The RSTC at UNL, with an estimated value of \$34,965, is about 0.87 standard deviations below the mean, and is the cutoff for the lowest quartile. Full descriptive data on the estimated value of these 10 schools can be found in Table 3c.

While most of the Universities do not publish how many students each year are offered or awarded these large merit-based scholarships, some are clearly more selective than others. At Michigan State University, 15 applicants are awarded the Alumni Distinguished Scholarship each year. The 20 next-best applicants are awarded the Distinguished Freshman Scholarship; an award that is worth \$46,088 less than the Alumni Distinguished Scholarship, but still entirely covers tuition and fees. So, 25 students at Michigan State are granted a scholarship that (at least) covers tuition. This is much more selective than the RSTC, which was offered to 964 students for the 2020 fall semester (see again Table 1).

Perhaps the most comparable scholarship to UNL's RSTC is the Iowa Flagship Award (IFA) offered at the University of Iowa. The estimated value of the IFA is \$34,000, just \$965 less than

the estimated value of the RSTC. The requirements for earning this award are similar as well. The IFA is only offered to Iowa residents who are graduating seniors with a high school GPA of 3.80 and who score a 33 on the ACT (or comparable SAT score). As a reminder, the RSTC is only offered to Nebraska residents who are graduating seniors. Additionally, while there are no GPA or ACT requirements for it to be offered per se, a competitive applicant would have an ACT composite score of 32 or higher, with outstanding high school GPA or class rank. In 2018, students who scored a 32 were in the 96th percentile nationally. Those who scored a 33 (3,583 fewer students) were in the 97th percentile of national test takers, making the IFA slightly more competitive by ACT score.

While Nebraska's RSTC and Iowa's IFA are similar in both value and competitiveness, the minimum GPA for the IFA is 3.00, while the RSTC's required GPA minimum is 3.50. It must be noted, however, that students with the IFA's GPA is reviewed after each semester to ensure they meet the requirement. This functionally means they have more opportunities to lose their scholarship; if their GPA drops below 3.00 in the fall semester, they don't have the opportunity to bring it up by the end of the spring semester. Since Regents Scholar's GPA is only reviewed after the spring semester, if their GPA falls below 3.50 in the fall, their scholarship may still be renewed if they raise their cumulative GPA above 3.50 by the end of the fall semester.

Among the Big Ten schools who publicly announce the renewal period for their scholarships, 5 schools (including UNL) review eligibility for renewal yearly. The University of Iowa and the University of Maryland both review their scholarship renewal eligibility at the end of each semester. The University of Maryland specifies that students are given a one semester grace period to bring their GPA back up if they fall below their 3.20 GPA requirement. During this grace semester, students still receive the full benefit of the scholarship.

Of all the Big Ten schools, there are several unique cases. The Eminence Fellows Program and Scholarship at Ohio State is unique because it has differential requirements; for some programs, a 3.50 GPA is required to maintain the scholarship, while some (presumably harder majors) only require a 3.40. The Regents Scholar Tuition commitment at UNL is the only program that includes a class rank caveat to the GPA requirement. As a reminder, students in the top 25 percent of their respective college may have their RSTC renewed even if they do not meet the 3.50 GPA requirement, though seldom or never is the top 25 percent cutoff below a 3.50. Northwestern University is the only institution that doesn't offer a merit-based scholarship that covers most or all tuition. Merit-based scholarships offered at Northwestern are very limited, and most aid offered by the university is based on financial need.

To summarize, the Regents Scholar Tuition Commitment is in the lowest quartile of estimated value compared to 13 comparable scholarships offered at 12 of UNL's 13 peer institutions in the Big Ten. Among the 10 programs that publicize their GPA renewal requirements, the RSTC's requirement is tied for strictest along with two other programs. One of those programs (The Eminence Fellows Program and Scholarship at Ohio State), however, has a differential GPA requirement, with the GPA requirement of only 3.40 depending on the program. The RSTC has no such differential GPA distinction. In terms of value and competitiveness, the RSTC is perhaps most comparable to the University of Iowa's Iowa Flagship Award, which has a semesterly cumulative GPA requirement of 3.00 compared to the RSTC's yearly cumulative 3.50 GPA requirement.

Future Work

In the future, I will examine the choices that Regents Scholars make while they are enrolled at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Because the Regents Scholar Tuition Commitment represents significant value (about \$34,965 over four years) and has relatively strict renewal requirements, I expect students will make academic choices to maximize their GPA and thus the likelihood of reaching the renewal requirement. Two choices I want to investigate is the student's decision to change majors and a student's decision to drop out of school. To investigate this, I will examine several years of individual level data of past students at UNL. To see if the GPA renewal requirement makes students behave differently, I would compare Regents Scholars with similarly gifted students who were not awarded a Regents Scholarship. I am especially interested in the behavior—major changes and drop out decisions—of Regents Scholars whose GPA is marginally close to 3.50. If I find the GPA requirement has a large affect on Regents Scholars decisions to change majors or if they choose to drop out after they lose it, it may warrant a discussion around changing the requirement. If there is a small or no effect, we can be satisfied the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has crafted a scholarship policy that minimizes negative outcomes.

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Table 1: Regents Offered by Year

Academic Year	Number Awarded	Total Undergraduate Enrollment Fall Semester	Regents Awarded as Percent of Total Undergraduate Enrollment (%)
2020-21	964	20,286	4.75
2019-20	926	20,478	4.52
2018-19	865	20830	4.15
2017-18	743	20,954	3.55
2016-17	645	20,833	3.10
2013-14	387	19,376	2.00
2012-13	367	19,103	1.92
2010-11	350	19,383	1.81
2009-10	367	18,955	1.94
1999-2000	319	17,727	1.80

Sources Table 1: (The Grand Island Independent, 2011) (Lincoln Journal Star, 2009) (Nebraska Today, 2010) (Nebraska Today, 2013) (Nebraska Today, 2016) (Nebraska Today, 2017) (Nebraska Today, 2018) (Nebraska Today, 2019) (Nebraska Today, 2020) (University of Nebraska-Lincoln c) (York News Times, 2012)

Table 2: GPA

Letter Grade	Points
A+	4.00
A	4.00
A-	3.67
B+	3.33
B	3.00
B-	2.67
C+	2.33
C	2.00
C-	1.67
D+	1.33
D	1.00
D-	0.67

Source Table 2: (University of Nebraska-Lincoln e)

Table 3a: Big Ten Scholarships

School	Name of Scholarship	Qualifications	GPA Requirements to Renew/Maintain	Renewal Review	Est. 4 year value [†]	Amount/terms
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	Regents Scholars Tuition Commitment (formerly Regents Scholarship)	32 ACT, outstanding high school GPA or class rank, holistic review process	3.500 (or top 25% of class)	Yearly	\$34,965*	full resident tuition up to 135 hours
Indiana University	Provost's Scholarship	SAT 1100 or higher ACT 24 or higher and a GPA of 3.0 or higher.	3	Yearly	\$4,000-\$32,000	\$1,000-\$8,000 annually
Michigan State University	Alumni Distinguished Scholarship	Top 15 applicants	Not Public	Not Public	\$104,184*	Tuition, fees, room and board, and \$1,000 stipend annually
Michigan State University (cont.)	Distinguished Freshman Scholarship	20 runners-up of Alumni Distinguished Scholarship applicants	Not Public	Not Public	\$58,096*	Tuition and fees for 8 semesters
Northwestern University	No comparable scholarship	Largely need based aid Minimal merit opportunities	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Penn State University	Provost's Award	Top 15% of applicants based on academic merit, background, and leadership capabilities	2.0	Yearly	\$24,000	\$24,000 awarded over 4 years, \$5000/year for years 1 & 2, \$7,000 for years 3 & 4
Purdue University	Trustees Scholarship	Holistic Evaluation, Exceptional academic achievement; leadership and service in	3	Not Public	40000	\$10,000 per year
Rutgers University	Presidential Scholarship	Academic strengths and performance	3.5	Not Public	\$116,000*	up to \$29,000 annually tuition, room and board
The Ohio State University	Eminence Fellows Program and Scholarship	Strength of common application, an Eminence essay, and a video introduction	3.4 or 3.5 (based on program)	Yearly	\$118,296*	Full cost of attendance plus a \$3,000 grant after the first year of study.
Univ of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	James Hunter Anthony & Gerald E. Blackshear Endowment	Automatically considered	3	Yearly	\$65,048	Full tuition and fees for an academic year, renewable for 4 years
University of Iowa	Iowa Flagship Award	33 ACT (SAT 1450) AND a 3.80 cumulative GPA on a 4.00 scale	3.00	Semesterly	\$34,000	\$8500/ year up to four years or a degree
University of Maryland	Banneker/Key Scholars Program	Select group based on significant academic leadership and accomplishment in high school	3.2	Semesterly (with 1 grace period)	\$99,608 Full* \$37,000 Partial*	Full or partial funding: full covers full tuition, room and meal plan for 4 years. Partial covers \$8,000 for in state students, \$12,000 for out of state students. Both include a book allowance.
University of Michigan	Stamps Scholarship	28 students Early Action, Academic achievement, demonstrated leadership, commitment to community. Recruitment weekend and interviews required	Not Public	Not Public	\$139,938*	Full cost of attendance and up to \$10,000 study abroad/internship funding
University of Minnesota	Maroon and Gold Leadership Award	Holistic Evaluation	Not Public	Not Public	\$48,000	\$12,000/year for 4 years
University of Wisconsin-Madison	Chancellor's Scholarship	Holistic Review, high school academic achievement, leadership skills, commitment to volunteer service	3	Not Public	\$46,168*	Full tuition and book stipend

[†]All values based on amount/terms column and sources provided by the institutions. Differential Tuition is not factored into this estimate.

*Assumes no increases. Based on 2020-2021 academic year.

**Table 3b: Scholarship
GPA Requirements**

Mean	3.065
Median	3.00
Mode	3.00
Std. Dev.	0.4346
Range	1.50
Minimum	2.00
Maximum	3.50
Count	10
Q ₁	3.00
Q ₂	3.00
Q ₃	3.45
Outlier(s)	2.00

Note: as The Ohio State University's requirements differ by program (either a 3.4 or 3.5), I chose to first average those two requirements to 3.45, and used that number to represent all of Ohio State.

**Table 3c: Scholarship
Estimated Value**

Mean	68590
Median	53048
Std. Dev.	38789
Range	115938
Minimum	24000
Maximum	139938
Count	14
Q ₁	34965
Q ₂	53048
Q ₃	104184
Outliers	none

Note: All values are rounded to the nearest dollar. The University of Michigan's two programs were both included separately in this calculation. For scholarships with a range of values, the highest value was taken.

Sources for Tables 3a-c: (Indiana University Bloomington a-b) (Michigan State University a-b) (Northwestern University) (The Ohio State University a-c) (The Pennsylvania State University) (Purdue University) (Rutgers University a-b) (Unigo 2020) (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign a-b) (The University of Iowa) (University of Maryland a-c) (University of Michigan a-b) (University of Minnesota) (University of Nebraska-Lincoln a-b, d, f) (University of Wisconsin-Madison a-b)